

The influence of concept features and semantic field on lexical heterogeneity

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Background: One of the aims of Cognitive Sociolinguistics is to introduce a cognitive perspective to sociolinguistic research (Geeraerts, Kristiansen and Peirsman 2010). In line with this goal, Speelman and Geeraerts (2008) and Geeraerts and Speelman (2010) analyzed the influence of non-traditional conceptual features, such as concept vagueness and salience, on lexical variation in dialects in a study on the semantic field 'the human body' in the Dictionary of Limburgish Dialects. Their study challenges a traditional assumption of dialectometry: that language variation is governed by lectal or geographical factors (Séguy 1971; Nerbonne and Kleiweg 2007; Wieling, Nerbonne and Baayen 2011). The analysis demonstrated that vaguer, less salient or negatively connoted concepts are significantly more prone to variation in concept naming. Moreover, it showed that these kinds of conceptual features can also distort the geographical spread of lexical variants.

Research question: Since the studies by Speelman and Geeraerts (2008) and Geeraerts and Speelman (2010) only take one semantic field into account, it remains unclear whether the results that were obtained are stable in other conceptual domains, and whether the amount of lexical heterogeneity that occurs in dialects is also dependent on the semantic field itself. In this paper, we aim to address these issues.

Design of the study: We intend to provide further evidence for the influence of non-traditional concept features on lexical heterogeneity by expanding the scope to the semantic fields 'family and sexuality', 'character and feelings' and 'the physical and abstract world' in the digitized database of the Dictionary of Limburgish Dialects. Methodologically, we adopt the onomasiological, profile-based approach of the studies by Speelman and Geeraerts (2008) and Geeraerts and Speelman (2010). Our analysis takes a quantitative approach: we aggregate over the concepts that are available in the database in the semantic fields under scrutiny and use mixed-effects linear regression analysis to predict onomasiological heterogeneity, with concept vagueness, salience and negative affect as predictors. This strategy allows us to explore the effect of the conceptual domain on lexical geographical variation. We will also use the results of our regression models for a dialectometric analysis of the Limburgish dialect area.

Results: Our preliminary results reveal that vagueness, lack of salience and negative affect are significant predictors of lexical heterogeneity in other semantic domains than the human body. Moreover, our initial analyses indicate that, as expected, differences between semantic fields occur. Furthermore, our usage-based study provides additional support for the importance of combining semantic and cognitive factors in the research of lexical variation.

References

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